



Gearing Up For Your Transitions

Relationships & Disability

Or Disabled Relationships (just 'cause it's funny)

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By Kieran McGovern

Relationships can be regarded as rough, hilly terrain; riddled with deep chasms, pools of quicksand and streams too deep and rapid to cross by foot. People with disabilities often think relationships are inaccessible. The source of such misconceptions is usually a feeling of insecurity related to one's disability – they feel unattractive. Some question, “Who would want to be with a freak like me?”

What a lot of folks don't consider is that most people, even those who are non-disabled, ask those same questions at some point in life. Now, I'd be the first one to say, “quit being emo and get over it!” But I realize it's something that can't be written off.

People with disabilities often are so insecure, or perhaps bitter, that they expect other people to approach them and show interest first. A lot of that is due to the social misconceptions surrounding those with disabilities. While general attitudes toward disability are changing, the world at large still does not consider people with disabilities to be capable of having fulfilling relationships.

I've had a “mainstream” life experience. I attended non-disabled schools, camps and extra-curricular activities all my life. All the girls I have been with were non-disabled (until they met me, then they had psychiatric disabilities!). When I started using a wheelchair, I thought, “Gee, no girl will like me now.” Only later did I realize that I was being the discriminatory one. Not only did I falsely assume all non-disabled girls wouldn't like a guy with a wheelchair, I hadn't considered girls who had disabilities. Talk about being a hypocrite!

Last summer, I attended the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) annual convention in Washington D.C. In talking to other folks and being brand new to the disability community, I was genuinely shocked to learn of the rest of society's attitude toward disability and sexuality. I had known sex in general is a touchy and controversial topic but figured it was accepted that all people participate in it. The non-disabled world is largely unaware that people with disabilities have sex, too. Oftentimes people associate disability with unattractiveness and inability. That misconception can take hold of people with disabilities and drag us down. It's important to remember that sexuality and disability are not incompatible. In some cases, we may simply need to think of different ways to express our sexuality.

All I can do to help is say that confidence comes from within. It is important for all people to recognize that modern standards of beauty are largely constructed by the media. Celebrity magazines, movies and television can often put pressure on people to look and dress a certain way – to be flawless – which impossible. The greatest celebrities are not flawless, and it's important to realize that. I don't look like

Justin Timberlake or Orlando Bloom and I couldn't care less (and I know I'm twice as good-looking as both!). I can't put a show on with my fancy footwork like Usher does, but he can't wheelchair-dance like I do. What attracts people is confidence – the confidence to show our talents and passions. It's OK to be shy (I know I am), but as cliché as it sounds, never be afraid to show your inner self; that is what's truly attractive.

The most unattractive thing is to sell oneself short but it can be worked on. Get involved, get out there, take chances and, have standards, but never discriminate – you don't like it when people do it to you! Having standards, on the other hand, is human. Everyone likes something different in a potential partner, and that's fine. But you can't let it limit you from trying new things and meeting new people!

In the world of relationships, people with disabilities must cross the same, treacherous terrain as everyone else. It can be done, we just need to believe in ourselves and use our unique sense of creativity to cross those rivers and hills.

Kieran McGovern is a college graduate and works as a Systems Advocate at a Center Independent Living in Long Island, NY. Kieran is a hockey fan and enjoys performing music and comedy. Kieran would love to hear what you think --- please visit the KASA Forums and share your thoughts!